

2.

Personal stories

Resource sheet

The following stories were received as submissions to the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. For additional stories see: www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/about/personal_stories.html

Paul

For 18 years the State of Victoria referred to me as State Ward No 54321.

I was born in May 1964. My Mother and I lived together within an inner suburb of Melbourne. At the age of five and a half months, both my Mother and I became ill. My Mother took me to the Royal Children's Hospital, where I was admitted.

Upon my recovery, the Social Welfare Department of the Royal Children's Hospital persuaded my Mother to board me into St Gabriel's Babies' Home in Balwyn ... just until Mum regained her health. If only Mum could've known the secret, deceitful agenda of the State welfare system that was about to be put into motion – 18 years of forced separation between a loving mother and her son.

Early in 1965, I was made a ward of the State. The reason given by the State was that, 'Mother is unable to provide adequate care for her son'.

In February 1967, the County Court of Victoria dispensed with my Mother's consent to adoption. This decision, made under section 67(d) of the Child Welfare Act 1958, was purportedly based on an 'inability to locate mother'. Only paltry attempts had been made to locate her. For example, no attempt was made to find her address through the Aboriginal Welfare Board.

I was immediately transferred to Blackburn South Cottages to be assessed for 'suitable adoptive placement'. When my Mother came for one of her visits, she found an empty cot. With the stroke of a pen, my Mother's Heart and Spirit had been shattered. Later, she was to describe this to me as one of the 'darkest days of her life'.

Repeated requests about my whereabouts were rejected. All her cries for help fell on deaf ears by a Government who had stolen her son, and who had decided 'they' knew what was best for this so-called part-Aboriginal boy.

In October 1967 I was placed with a family for adoption. This placement was a dismal failure, lasting only 7 months. This family rejected me, and requested my removal, claiming in their words that I was unresponsive, dull, and that my so-called deficiencies were unacceptable. In the Medical Officer's report on my file there is a comment that Mrs A 'compared him unfavourably with her friends' children and finds his deficiencies an embarrassment, eg at coffee parties'.

Upon removal, I was placed at the Gables Orphanage in Kew, where I was institutionalised for a further two years. Within this two years, I can clearly remember being withdrawn and frightened, and remember not talking to anyone for days on end.

I clearly remember being put in line-ups every fortnight, where prospective foster parents would view all the children. I was always left behind. I remember people coming to the Gables, and taking me to their homes on weekends, but I would always be brought back. Apparently I wasn't quite the child they were looking for.

My dark complexion was a problem.

The Gables knew my dark complexion was a problem, constantly trying to reassure prospective foster parents that I could be taken as Southern European in origin.

In January 1970, I was again placed with a foster family, where I remained until I was 17. This family had four natural sons of their own. I was the only fostered child.

During this placement, I was acutely aware of my colour, and I knew I was different from the other members of their family. At no stage was I ever told of my Aboriginality, or my natural mother or father. When I'd say to my foster family, 'why am I a different colour?', they would laugh at me, and would tell me to drink plenty of milk, 'and then you will look more like us'. The other sons would call me names such as 'their little Abo', and tease me. At the time, I didn't know what this meant, but it did really hurt, and I'd run into the bedroom crying. They would threaten to hurt me if I told anyone they said these things.

My foster family made me attend the same primary and secondary school that their other children had all previously attended. Because of this, I was ridiculed and made fun of, by students and teachers. Everyone knew that I was different from the other family members, and that I couldn't be their real brother, even though I'd been given the same surname as them. Often I would run out of class crying, and would hide in the school grounds.

The foster family would punish me severely for the slightest thing they regarded as unacceptable or unchristian-like behaviour, even if I didn't eat my dinner or tea. Sometimes I would be locked in my room for hours. Countless times the foster father would rain blows upon me with his favourite leather strap. He would continue until I wept uncontrollably, pleading for him to stop.

My Mother never gave up trying to locate me.

Throughout all these years – from 5 and a half months old to 18 years of age, my Mother never gave up trying to locate me.

She wrote many letters to the State Welfare Authorities, pleading with them to give her son back. Birthday and Christmas cards were sent care of the Welfare Department. All these letters were shelved. The State Welfare Department treated my Mother like dirt, and with utter contempt, as if she never existed. The Department rejected and scoffed at all my Mother's cries and pleas for help. They inflicted a terrible pain of Separation, Anguish and Grief upon a mother who only ever wanted her son back.

In May 1982, I was requested to attend at the Sunshine Welfare Offices, where they formerly discharged me from State wardship. It took the Senior Welfare Officer a mere twenty minutes to come clean, and tell me everything that my heart had always wanted to know. He conveyed to me in a matter-of-fact way that I was of 'Aboriginal descent', that I had a Natural mother, father, three brothers and a sister, who were alive.

He explained that his Department's position was only to protect me and, 'that is why you were not told these things before'. He placed in front of me 368 pages of my file, together with letters, photos and birthday cards. He informed me that my surname would change back to my Mother's maiden name of Angus.

The welfare officer scribbled on a piece of paper my Mother's current address in case, in his words, I'd 'ever want to meet her'. I cried tears of Relief, Guilt and Anger. The official conclusion, on the very last page of my file, reads:

'Paul is a very intelligent, likeable boy, who has made remarkable progress, given the unfortunate treatment of his Mother by the department during his childhood.'

Confidential submission 133, Victoria. When Paul located his mother at the age of 18 she was working in a hostel for Aboriginal children with 20 children under her care. She died six years later at the age of 45.

Paul's story appears on page 68 of *Bringing them home*.

Greg

I was born on Cape Barren. At the time I was taken the family comprised mum, my sister and [my two brothers]. And of course there was my grandmother and all the other various relatives. We were only a fairly small isolated community and we all grew up there in what I considered to be a very peaceful loving community. I recall spending most of my growing up on the Island actually living in the home of my grandmother and grandfather. The other children were living with mum in other places.

Until the time I was taken I had not been away from the Island, other than our annual trips from Cape Barren across to Lady Baron during the mutton bird season.

The circumstances of my being taken, as I recollect, were that I went off to school in the morning and I was sitting in the classroom and there was only one room where all the children were assembled and there was a knock at the door, which the schoolmaster answered. After a conversation he had with somebody at the door, he came to get me. He took me by the hand and took me to the door. I was physically grabbed by a male person at the door, I was taken to a motor bike and held by the officer and driven to the airstrip and flown off the Island. I was taken from Cape Barren in October 1959 [aged 12].

I had no knowledge [I was going to be taken]. I was not even able to see my grandmother [and I had] just the clothes I had on my back, such as they were. I never saw mum again.

To all intents and purposes, I guess my grandmother was looked upon as my mother in some respects because of my association with her and when I was taken there are actual letters on my file that indicate that she was so affected by the circumstances of my being removed from the Island that she was hospitalised, and was fretting and generally her health went on her. A nursing sister on the Island had my grandmother in hospital and she was in fact writing letters to the Welfare Department to find out, you know, how I was getting on and that sort of thing, and asking if I could go back to the Island for holidays. That was refused. My grandmother was removed from the Island and placed in an aged-care hospital, and I was taken to see her and when I did she had basically lost her mind and she did not know who I was.

It is fairly evident from reading my welfare file that [the teacher] was the eyes and ears of the Welfare Department and that he was obviously sending reports back to them about the conditions on the Island.

There is a consent form on [my] file that mum signed and it did include [my sister and my two brothers] – and their names were crossed out and mine was left. I do not know whether it was because I was at the top or not. I might add that most people that I have spoken to said that mum, whilst she could read her name, could not read or write, and obviously would not have understood the implications of what she was signing. [It] has been witnessed by the schoolmaster.

I was flown off the Island and ... I was flown to where the small planes land at Launceston. I was eventually placed with some people in Launceston. I have some recollection of going to school at some stage. I noted from my file that I was transported to Hobart in 1960 – my recollection of that was being put into a semi-trailer and picked up on the side of the road by some welfare officers down there. I was placed with some people in [Hobart], and I guess, fortunately for me, I could not have been in better hands because I still maintain a relationship with them; they look on me as their son. They had one daughter but Mrs — used to care for other foster children and the house was full of other non-Aboriginal children.

I had always wanted to return to the Island but I could never bring myself to hopping on a plane and returning. [It was] thirty years before I went back. [The night I returned] I could not settle. I think I had a cup of tea and I decided I would go in a different direction and I walked around the sand spit and – I do not know, something just made me turn around and look back and I looked to the school and – I just looked back to where we used to live as kids. My whole life flashed before me and I just collapsed

in the sand and started crying ... And when I composed myself as best I could I just sort of reflected on things and my whole life was just racing through my mind and I guess I just wanted to be part of a family that I never had. I just wanted to be with my mum and my grandmother and my brothers and sisters.

Confidential evidence 384, Tasmania. The consent form signed by Greg's mother states the reason for his removal: 'I am a widow, in poor health'. After Greg was taken his mother had another daughter but Greg was not aware of her existence until 1994. One of Greg's brothers states that after Greg went their mother 'was in total despair'. They lived in conditions of extreme poverty in 'a run down shanty'. One afternoon their mother went drinking and suffered a fatal accident. Later the police came with a warrant to collect the children and flew them to Launceston. The boys were fostered together but each of the girls went to a different family. The first time the five children were all together was in 1995.

Greg's story appears on page 99 of *Bringing them home*.

Evie

My grandmother was taken from up Tennant Creek. What gave them the right to just go and take them? They brought her down to The Bungalow [at Alice Springs]. Then she had Uncle Billy and my Mum to an Aboriginal Protection Officer. She had no say in that from what I can gather. And then from there they sent her out to Hermannsburg – because you know, she was only 14 when she had Uncle Billy, 15 when she had Mum. When she was 15 and a half they took her to Hermannsburg and married her up to an Aranda man. That's a no-no.

And then from there, when Mum was 3, they ended up taking Mum from Hermannsburg, putting her in The Bungalow until she was 11. And then they sent her to Mulgoa mission in New South Wales. From there they sent her to Carlingford Girls' Home to be a maid. She couldn't get back to the Territory and she'd had a little baby.

Agnes [witness's sister] and I have met him [their older brother]. We met him when he was 35. He's now 42 so that's not that far away. Mum had him and she was working but she doesn't know what happened to her money. When she kept asking for her money so she could pay her fare back to Alice Springs they wouldn't give her any.

I've got paperwork on her from Archives in New South Wales. There's letters – stacks of 'em – between the Aboriginal Protection Board, New South Wales, and Northern Territory. All on my mother. They were fighting about which jurisdiction she was in - New South Wales yet she was a kid from the Northern Territory. So one State was saying we're not paying because she's New South Wales, they should pay.

In the end New South Wales said to Mum, 'I'll pay your fare back on the condition that because you haven't got a husband and you've got a baby, you leave that baby here'. So she left her baby behind and came back to the Territory.

And then she had me and then my brother and another two brothers and a sister and we were all taken away as soon as we were born. Two of them were put in Retta Dixon and by the time they were 18 months old they were sent down south and adopted. She had two kids, like they were 15 months apart, but as soon as they turned 18 months old they were sent down south and adopted out.

One of them came back in 1992. He just has that many problems. The others we don't know where they are. So it's like we've still got a broken family.

I was taken away in 1950 when I was 6 hours old from hospital and put into Retta Dixon until I was 2 months old and then sent to Garden Point. I lived in Garden Point until 1964. And from Garden Point, Tennant Creek, Hermannsburg. While in Garden Point I always say that some of it was the happiest

time of my life; others it was the saddest time of my life. The happiest time was, 'Yippee! all these other kids there'. You know, you got to play with them every day. The saddest times were the abuse. Not only the physical abuse, the sexual abuse by the priests over there. And they were the saddest because if you were to tell anyone, well, the priests threatened that they would actually come and get you.

Everyone could see what they were doing but were told to keep quiet. And just every day you used to get hidings with the stock-whip. Doesn't matter what you did wrong, you'd get a hiding with the stock-whip. If you didn't want to go to church, well you got slapped about the head. We had to go to church three times a day. I was actually relieved to leave the Island.

In 1977 I had three children. In 1977 my oldest was three years old then. I had another one that was twelve months and another one that was two months old. All those kids were taken off me. The reason behind that was, well, I'd asked my girl-friend and so-called sister-in-law if she could look after my kids. She wouldn't look after my daughter because my daughter's black. So, she said she'd take the two boys and that was fine. And while I was in hospital for three months – that's the only reason I asked them to take 'em 'cause I was going to hospital because I had septicaemia.

I couldn't get my kids back when I came out of hospital. And I fought the welfare system for ten years and still couldn't get 'em. I gave up after ten years. Once I gave up I found out that while I was in hospital, my sister-in-law wanted to go overseas with my two boys 'cause her husband was being posted there for 12 months from foreign affairs. And I know she brought some papers in for me to sign while I was in hospital and she said they were just papers for their passports. Stupid me, being sick and what-have-you didn't ask questions – I signed 'em and found out too late they were adoption papers. I had 30 days to revoke any orders that I'd signed.

And with my daughter, well she came back in '88 but things just aren't working out there. She blames me for everything that went wrong. She's got this hate about her – doesn't want to know. The two boys know where I am but turned around and said to us, 'You're not our mother – we know who our real mother is'.

So every day of your bloody life you just get hurt all the time ...

Confidential evidence 557, Northern Territory.

Evie's story appears on page 147 of *Bringing them home*. Last updated 2 December 2001.

Karen

I am a part Aboriginal woman, who was adopted out at birth. I was adopted by a white Australian family and came to live in New Zealand at the age of 6 months. I grew up not knowing about my natural Mother and Father. The only information my adoptive parents had about my birth, was the surname of my birth Mother.

I guess I had quite a good relationship with my adoptive Mum, Dad and sisters. Though my adopted Mother said I kept to myself a lot, while I was growing up. As I got older I noticed my skin colouring was different to that of my family. My Mother told me I was adopted from Australia and part Aboriginal. I felt quite lonely especially as I approached my teens. I got teased often about being Aboriginal and became very withdrawn and mixed up, I really did not know where I belonged.

As a result of this I started having psychiatric problems. I seem to cope and muddle along.

I eventually got married to a New Zealander, we have two boys, who are now teenagers. One of our boys is dark like myself, and was interested in his heritage. I was unable to tell him anything, as I didn't know about it myself.

My husband, boys and myself had the opportunity to go to Melbourne about 7 years ago on a working holiday for 10 weeks. While in Melbourne I went to the Aboriginal Health Centre and spoke to a social worker, as I had a copy of my birth certificate with my birth Mother's name on it. The social worker recognized my Mother's surname 'Graham', and got in touch with my aunty, who gave me my Mother's phone number.

I got in touch with my birth Mother and made arrangements to meet her. I have a half brother and sister. My birth Mother and Father never married, though my Father knew my Mother was pregnant with me. My Mother did not know where my Father was, as they parted before I was born. My sister decided to call a local Melbourne paper and put our story in the paper on how I had found them after 29 years.

My Father who was in Melbourne at the time, saw the article and a photo of my Mother and myself in the paper. He recognized my Mother and got in touch with her. My Mother and I had been corresponding, after we returned to New Zealand. For her own reasons, she would not give my Father my address, so my Father went through the social service agency and got in touch with me two and a half years ago. I have met my birth Father, as I had a family wedding in Melbourne shortly after he made contact with me, so I made arrangements to meet him.

We kept in contact with one another, but I feel we will never be able to make up for lost time, as my birth parents live in Australia and myself in New Zealand.

I still feel confused about where I belong, it has been very emotional and the result of this caused me to have a complete nervous breakdown. I am on medication daily and am having to see a counsellor to help me come to terms and accept the situation, where I am at right now and to sort out some confused feelings. My adoptive family really don't want to know too much about my birth family, which also makes it hard.

I feel that I should be entitled to some financial compensation for travel purposes, to enable us to do this.

Confidential submission 823, New Zealand.

Karen's story appears on page 244 of *Bringing them home*.